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2006

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### Recommended Citation

Keene, Jennifer D. "Work Or Fight!" Race, Gender, And The Draft In World War One By Gerald E. Shenk." *Register Of The Kentucky Historical Society* 104, no.3 (2006): 746-748. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005.

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# Review of "'Work Or Fight!' Race, Gender, And The Draft In World War One" By Gerald E. Shenk

## **Comments**

This review was originally published in *Register Of The Kentucky Historical Society*, volume 104, issue 3, in 2006.

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Kentucky Historical Society

*"Work or Fight!" Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One.* By Gerald E. Shenk. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. Pp. x, 194. \$79.95 cloth; \$26.95 paper.)

*"Work or Fight!" Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One* is an ambitious book. Shifting our focus away from the halls of Congress and the offices of the War Department, Gerald Shenk examines the workings of the World War I draft in Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, and California. Rather than detailing the creation of policies from above, Shenk proposes that the operation of the Selective Service System in individual communities reveals much about race and gender in American society. Jeannette Keith recently made the same point in her excellent treatment of draft resistance in the South during the

First World War in her book *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South During the First World War* (2004). Ultimately, Keith's decision to focus on one region rather than four proves more successful. By attempting so much in so few pages, Shenk ends up skimming the surface of multiple issues that deserve fuller scrutiny. In Georgia, Illinois, and New Jersey, for instance, Shenk details how the white elite who dominated the local draft boards used their position to protect the existing racial order. In California, however, Selective Service regulations challenged the state's prevailing definition of who was white by requiring that local boards classify all men of Asian descent as white. Shenk makes this intriguing point and situates it well in the discriminatory legal environment that created separate schools for Asian immigrants and prevented them from owning land. During the war, Japanese men argued that their economic success demonstrated their "Americaness" while whites viewed their success as evidence of the threat that they posed to white Americans in California. Unfortunately, Shenk details this fascinating dilemma in a few pages, then shifts abruptly to a political scandal involving the draft deferment of the heir to the Scripps newspaper fortune.

The differences between these four states also create a problem of narrative coherence in the book. Shenk attempts to link the quite different economic and racial struggles in each region around the framework of whiteness and manhood. While these are certainly valid analytical categories that Shenk uses to good effect at moments, in the end these theoretical concepts limit his ability to draw broader conclusions from the rich material he presents. Examining whiteness and manhood in each state leads to repetitiveness throughout the book, with each chapter ending with the similar conclusion that white elites sought to use their role in the draft process to consolidate their control over blacks, workers, immigrants, and sometimes women.

Part of the problem is the records of the Selective Service System upon which Shenk relies for many of his conclusions. The local records, as Shenk demonstrates, aptly reveal that regional politics and power struggles affected the operation of the draft during the war. The resolution of these struggles, however, becomes reduced in this equation to whether or not a man was drafted. It fails to take into account the ways that marginalized groups expected to use military service to challenge the very racial and economic oppression that powerful whites wanted to preserve or the ways that Americans resisted the draft as an extension of state control into their lives. Perhaps most importantly, the sole focus on the local draft process tends to drop the war out of the equation all together. In an account that privileges

regional political struggles so completely, national debates about the war before America's entry, newspaper reports from the front, and letters from soldiers about the war have no place, thus disconnecting the operation of the draft too much from the actual war that conscripted men would have to fight.

**JENNIFER D. KEENE** *is an associate professor and chair of the history department at Chapman University. She is the author of Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America (2001) and is currently working on a book about African American soldiers in World War I.*